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SUBJECT: NEW STUDY GAUGES ARABS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEST,
REVEALS GROWING EXTREMISM AMONG YOUTH

SUMMARY

11. (U) A new study published by Jordan University's Center for Strategic Studies based on polls conducted in five Arab countries reveals that Arabs tend to distinguish between policy and culture when viewing the West. A negative view of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, not American values, is the main reason for anti-American sentiment in the region, according to this study. It also found that respondents tended to label groups like HAMAS and al-Qa'ida as legitimate resistance, not terrorist, organizations. The majority of those surveyed saw a role for Islam in politics. People aged 16-24 exhibited the most hostility towards U.S. policies, as well as the most conservative religious tendencies. End Summary.

NEW SURVEY MEASURES ARAB PERCEPTIONS

12. (U) The University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) released its latest poll in February, "The Arab Street Revisited: Research from Within," which explores Arab attitudes regarding the United States, the UK, and France, as well as attitudes regarding the place of Islam in politics, the definition of terrorism, and the importance of Arab satellite TV in the formation of regional opinions. CSS conducted the survey in mid-2004 in collaboration with partner institutions in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Syria. Four samples were used in each country: a national sample of 1200 individuals, a university student sample of 500, a sample of 120 business leaders, and a media sample of 120 respondents. The national sample in each country attempted to represent all social strata, reaching rural and urban areas, both genders, all ages, and varied occupational and educational backgrounds. For example, the national sample for Jordan included citizens of Palestinian origin as well as refugees, but refugee camps were not included in Syrian and Lebanese samples. The questionnaire itself included 150 questions dealing with topics that included Arab knowledge of and attitudes toward Western societies, the definition of terrorism, the influence of Arab satellite media, and political Islam. The full survey can be found on CSS's web site: www.css-jordan.org.

IT'S THE POLICY, STUPID

13. (U) The study seems to bear out what emboffs hear frequently, but anecdotally. That is, Arabs tend to separate policies from cultural values when viewing the West. The study identifies negative Arab reactions to U.S. Middle East policy as being the single most important factor contributing to anti-American sentiment among Arabs. In contrast, respondents in this survey tended to view positively Western cultural values, which they defined as liberty, hard work, pursuit of knowledge, and wealth creation. They also had clear perceptions of their own (different) identity, which they said centered on cultural values of family, religion, and tolerance.

14. (U) The survey revealed that Arabs did not perceive the "West" as a unified whole. Respondents tended to differentiate significantly between western countries, particularly with regard to politics. For example, those surveyed tended to view France much more positively than the U.S. and the UK, largely because they perceived more favorably French policies in the Middle East. The negative criticism sometimes reflected events on the ground. For example, some respondents used words like "racist" to describe French policies (the hijab issue was under debate in France at the time of the survey, possibly influencing respondents), while describing U.S. policies as "imperialist" and "repressive."

15. (U) While recognizing the problem of religious extremism in both Arab and Western societies, Arabs do not tend to view

the tension between the Arab world and the West in either religious or cultural terms, according to the survey. Moreover, most do not subscribe to the "clash of civilizations" theory or to the idea the West has launched a "crusade" against the Muslim world.

ROLE OF ISLAM IN POLITICS

16. (U) The study found strong support for shari'a to play a role in legislation. About two-thirds of Jordanians, Palestinians and Egyptians believe that shari'a must be the only source of legislation in their respective countries, while the remainder in these countries believe it should be one of the sources. However, the study reveals that the majority of respondents in all countries think that interpretation in religion (ijtihad) should remain open, suggesting that Arabs Muslims do not view Islam as a fixed set of ideas and beliefs, but rather see space for pluralism and debate.

TERRORISM OR LEGITIMATE RESISTANCE?

17. (U) The study concludes that Arabs tend to view terrorism through the lens of their frustrations with Israeli, American, and Western policies. For example, the majority of respondents perceived Palestinian groups such as HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades as legitimate resistance organizations. The majority of Jordanians and Egyptians also view al-Qa'ida as a legitimate resistance organization. Only 8 percent of Syrians believed the same, but 49 percent chose not to answer the question. Unsurprisingly, Arabs also disagreed fundamentally with the U.S. positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iraq war. They expressed little confidence in U.S.-led efforts to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict and they largely see the war in Iraq as unjustified. Despite these disagreements, many Arabs desire stronger relations between their countries and the West, particularly in culture and economics, which are viewed as less problematic than political relations.

WHO INFLUENCES U.S. POLICY?

18. (U) The respondents put the "Zionist lobby" above even President Bush in terms of perceived influence over U.S. foreign policy. Fewer than one-third of respondents in all national samples considered Bush as the most important foreign policy-maker. Thirty-nine percent of Jordanians, 43 percent of Palestinians, 44 percent of Lebanese and 61 percent of Syrians named the "Zionist lobby" as the single most important foreign policy actor in the U.S. Interestingly, business and media leaders tended to be the most likely of any group to identify the "Zionist lobby" as the most important actor (although the media respondents also considered the "American Christian Right" as an equally important player).

THE AL-JAZEERA FACTOR

19. (U) In contrast, the study concluded that satellite television coverage is not a leading factor fueling anti-American sentiment. It did not identify a strong correlation between satellite viewership and attitudes across Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The Lebanese have some of the highest rates of satellite ownership, with 85 percent of Lebanese and 84 percent of Palestinians having satellites in their homes. This compares to 25 percent of Egyptians and 58 percent of Jordanians. Yet, the study found that the attitudes of Egyptians and Jordanians toward the West are often more critical than those of the Lebanese.

GROWING HOSTILITY AMONG YOUTH

10. (U) Among the more disturbing findings, the study showed that young people tend to be more hostile to the West and more conservative when compared to the older generation. For example, 15-20 percent of youth aged 16-24 years old claimed to have favorable attitudes toward the U.S., compared with 35-40 percent of adults over 45 years old. Young people also are more likely to view organizations like al-Qa'ida as legitimate resistance organizations than their elders. Dr. Fares Breizat, director of CSS polling, highlighted this hostility among youth as the most worrisome trend revealed by the study, when one considers that 50 percent of the population in the region is under 25 years old.

¶11. (U) During a lecture to the World Affairs Council in Amman on March 1, Breizat noted that respondents in this age bracket supported polygamy more strongly than any other age group, and were more likely than any other group to base their life decisions and actions on religious beliefs. The comments sparked lively debate during the question and answer period, with some in the audience faulting government and Arab societies for marginalizing youth at the expense of elders in Arab culture. For example, some participants voiced support for the Jordanian government's prohibition on student politics as necessary for their own "protection," while others, including Breizat, countered that democracy and human development will never emerge if young people are not able to organize and think freely. "We must not underestimate the Jordanian citizen's intelligence" and it is crucial that government's move away from the role of "sheltering" youth; rather they should be considered as active, intelligent individuals, according to Breizat.

¶12. (U) Breizat doubted that cultural and social exchanges alone will alleviate tensions. According to Breizat, Arabs must perceive real changes in U.S. foreign policies, such as a U.S. withdrawal from a stable Iraq and a just solution to the Palestinian issue, before he expected perceptions to change significantly.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) The results of this study reinforce what we hear frequently from Jordanians: "we admire America and its values, it is your policy that we have issues with." However, some contacts suggest this distinction may be blurring; the Iraq and Palestinian situations in particular have convinced many that Americans advocate freedom and protect human rights only when it is convenient. Dr. Breizat noted that the study suggests that many Arabs have the perception that the majority of Americans do not support their government's Middle East policies, which may have been a reason it bore out the clear divide between policy and culture. However, he acknowledged that the results, conducted in mid-2004, may have been different if the study was conducted after the November, 2004 U.S. election. He hopes to be able to gauge the change, if any, as CSS plans to repeat the study in the future.

¶14. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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